

The Process for Peace – Will it Sustain – Afghanistan

Afghan aspiration for peace must be considered a just desire, keeping in view the longevity and suffering. Since the invasion of the Soviets, the Afghan nation is at war with outsiders or within own factions. The Soviets realized the gravity and reality of the unjust invasion and pulled out timely as continuation could have been more costly. Yet the empire collapsed under its own weight of economic sustenance. The US invasion of Afghanistan on plea or under the garb of terrorism is taking long to overcome the terrorism or achieve the vested interests in the region. It's been over eighteen years for the American and allied forces to achieve the objectives of operation enduring freedom (OEF – October 2001-December 2014) and operation freedom sentential (OFS – January 2015 till date). The presence of US and NATO forces is likely to continue despite the peace agreement and US assurance of leaving Afghanistan.

Encouraging is that the first block for peace building has been cemented by signing the agreement in Doha on 29 Feb 2020. Interesting was when Ghani challenged the viability by stating that releasing of 5000 Taliban poisoners was not part of the deal and the Afghan government was not part of the negotiations. Taliban, on other hand, stated that no intra-Afghan talks can take place without the release of the prisoners. Another uncertainty is the on-going political crisis emerging out of the presidential election results, which has been challenged by Abdullah Abdullah.

The next step in the process is the initiation of intra-Afghan dialogue by 10 March 2020, (the date has already passed) along with the release of prisoners by both sides, and the partial withdrawal of US forces within 135 days. What is intra-Afghan dialogue, who will be organizing, how will it be conducted,

who all will take part in the dialogue and what is the time frame? Difficult questions yet need to be answered.

According to para 4 of the agreement, between the US and Taliban, "A permanent and comprehensive ceasefire will be an item on the agenda of the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations. The participants of intra-Afghan negotiations will discuss the date and modalities of a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire, including joint implementation mechanisms, which will be announced along with the completion and agreement over the future political roadmap of Afghanistan".

The process requires some kind of homework at different levels on behalf of the sitting government, but who is head of the government, is another crisis like situation. Ghani has taken oath under the bullets, as the next elected president. Abdullah Abdullah has also taken oath as the Afghan president. Ghani's win has been challenged by Abdullah. So, the intra-Afghan dialogue faces the first challenge, of whom to talk and who is the President. Yet another catch-22, is that how the process of intra-Afghan will start.

A critical look at the purpose of intra Afghan dialogue, mentioned in the agreement indicates two prime objectives, **one**: discuss the date and modalities of a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire, including joint implementation mechanisms and **two**: along with the completion and agreement over the future political roadmap of Afghanistan. Taliban stated that they will engage all the political groups with the objective to reach consensus. But the question is that the first objective of intra Afghan dialogue is a permanent ceasefire, where participation of the sitting government is must. For the second part, however, all political leaders, warlords, and religious clerics have to be engaged to reach a consensus on future political system or setup.

So, the first step of enforcing the permanent and

comprehensive ceasefire, would require dialogue between the sitting government and the Taliban. Unfortunately, the political crisis in Kabul is more serious for the peace process as intra Afghan cannot begin without resolution of political crisis. Ghani and Abdullah will have to get to some kind of settlement or the peace process may stall. The US on the other hand, will have to intervene to make the rival leaders agree to forgo their personal gains and goods in the larger interests of the Afghan nation. President Ghani has to rise above self, if he desires peace in Afghanistan.

The question remains, that will the process sustain these challenges? The biggest hurdle at the moment is a political crisis. "One president" is a must to make the process take the next step. The next in line in the response of Ghani to the release of prisoners, which has resulted in a delay for the inter-Afghan dialogue. The fragility of the process is evident as all three parties to the conflict are still contesting their hardened positions. Taliban are waiting for the prisoner's release, the Afghan government is attaching conditions to the release of Taliban detainees, and the US is yet to start the pull out owing to the initiation of intra-Afghan dialogue, so the process is in waiting.

Afghan conflict resolution is not an easy affair in the backdrop of so many stakeholders and spoilers, who are working in parallel. Pakistan, the best loser in the Afghan conflict, along with the Afghan nation is anxiously waiting for the next round and will have to wait as complications are at hype.

Peace Agreement and its Implementation – “Worries”

Peace in Afghanistan, a desire that is being pursued by the Afghans first and others later yet, the warmongers and beneficiaries have been making all-out efforts to keep the battleground alive so as to reap as much as they desire. Those, who have worked tirelessly for the peace must be aspiring to witness the occasion of the peace signing ceremony on February 29, 2020. Let's hope that Afghan's dream comes true and peace prevails.

During September 2019, Afghan Taliban stated that they are ready to negotiate and their doors are open for discussion. Recalling the efforts of last year, hopes were high and expectations were that peace deal would be inked but President Trump's statement of abandoning the talks stalled the process and things went wary for the time being. Sense prevailed and the negotiations were resumed after a break in December 2019. During this uncertainty period, presidential election results were announced and Ashraf Ghani was declared the President.

The ongoing peace negotiations have finally met one of its mile-stone of temporary cease-fire or “Reduction in Violence” as per understanding between the US and Taliban, for one week starting from 22 February till 29 February. Another development or speculation or announcement is the signing of peace deal that is to be held on 29 February 2020. After the seven days, if the outcome is positive, both sides will move to the next phase of inter-Afghan dialogue.

So far, the progress on reduction in violence is encouraging and hopes are high about the signing of a peace deal. The General populace in Kabul are hopeful and happy over the developments. The political uncertainties are making the atmosphere a little tense. Abdullah Abdullah, declaring

himself as president and Dostum supporting him with challenging the IEC election announcement, is a hurdle in the proceedings. Inter-Afghan dialogue, which has to kick start after 29 February, after peace agreement signing ceremony will be facing the challenge of who and whom to talk.

The peace process is likely to face: the legitimacy of the president, who will be leading the talks from the government side so, the political uncertainties will be contributing to an uncertain peace process. If the situation of political divide persists where will Kabul be moving to? How will the US react to the crisis? Will we witness another unity government like resolve or sense will prevail, according to some, and Abdullah will set-aside in wake of peace and settlement? The questions are worth consideration.

If the confrontation between the two presidential rivals continues, the option which looks workable for the US is to install an interim government. A setup that would be broad-based, comprising political cum warlords cum religious leaders, so as to avoid any criticism from Taliban especially. Most interesting would be to include ethnic representation, Pashtun from both sides, the Taliban and Afghan government side will have to form part of the group holding discussions. This way the US will be able to exercise all its options of materializing the perceived peace and settlement.

The hurdles in way are the reaction and response of political leaders like Karzai, Ghani, Abdullah, Dostum, Mohaqiq, Zia Masood and few others. The sitting parliament is likely to react with more hardened stance, as they have been electorally elected through parliamentary elections after delay of years. Taliban would agree to the interim arrangement as that would suit their long-standing mistrust over the sitting government and leadership. However, the groups within Taliban rank and file, though speculated, is also a problem which may cause delay of continuation of unrest.

The general populace response is predictable and that would be wait and see, as they are fed-up with uncertainties and are desperately looking and expecting peace and security. Warlords are the most unpredictable faction, as they will be expecting share in interim and subsequently also. Anything short of their demands will create further instability and may stall the second step of the peace process, the Intra-Afghan Dialogue.

The situation is encouraging, in context to reduction in violence but is serious in context to political developments. Ghani and Abdullah's match over presidential result is adding to difficulties for the US and Zalmay will again be at shuttle diplomacy drive to resolve the ongoing political crisis, this time not with Taliban and Pakistan but within Afghanistan. Ghani is a US favorite and the US will try to make things go Ghani way, but making Abdullah agree is also not an easy task.

Afghanistan is not as calm as it appears, Taliban response to intra-Afghan is also to be seen in context to recent political developments. The interim set-up arrangements will also attract resistance. Other warring factions like Da'esh may also contribute to insecurity. The spoilers like India, who does not look at Taliban as an option even, may work towards their vested ends. Pakistan is likely to respond in following the US way of handling, as that suits Pakistan's option of peace with broad-based arrangements at Kabul.

Ghani Again the President

On December 22, 2109, the Independent Election Commission (IEC), Afghanistan announced the results of the recently held elections after the repeated delays in both, the holding of

elections and now the result announcement. Not a new happening of its kind, especially in Afghanistan. Ever since becoming a modern democratic country under the close watch of the US, such kinds of delays have been witnessed owing to many reasons. The observers for the elections need to understand that Afghanistan is low connectivity mechanism holding country with few good roads and rest dirt roads. No major railway network exists in the country. Population is spread over entire width and breadth of the country from snow clad, rugged mountains and vast desert stretches. So, the collection of polled ballot papers from all over the country is the major reason for delay besides the mechanism. Yet the delay was extraordinary therefore it attracted serious criticism.

Finally, the result was announced with Ghani being declared winner for the second term grabbing 50.64% and Abdullah Abdullah getting 39.5%. The result again attracted allegation of rigging from the arch rival Abdullah Abdullah as not legitimate and many others, which indicates the political immaturity and manipulation in election process. Another matter of concern was, the low turnout at the polling. Only 2 million voted out of the 9 million registered voters. One the major reason cited is the uncertainty. People were not sure whether the polls will happen or otherwise, due to consist delays in date of elections, ongoing peace talks between Taliban and the US, and the infighting or the insecurity.

Having said about the conduct of elections and the outcome, the point of discussion is will Afghan again have the power sharing formula like previous time or Ghani will hold office as clear winner. Indications are that Ghani will be declared as the successful and hold office for another five-year term. In his previous term the government failed to deliver in all realms. It was tug of war between the two top office holders for the posts of ministers, governors and even the decisions at national levels. The unity government was a failure in true

sense as it failed to perform and above all Unity Government was beyond constitutional arrangements.

Time is difficult for President Ghani, talks with Taliban are yet to yield results, though Taliban have agreed for short ceasefire of 7-10 days, according to media reports, before signing of the agreement with the US. After the agreement the next step is intra-Afghan dialogue. Some of the questions about this dialogue is that who will hold and initiate. Taliban do not recognize Afghan government same is for the Government, who consider Taliban as non-entity. Pakistan is friend of Taliban, so the Afghan government will not support Pakistan's role as initiator. Iran is stuck in internal cum external matters and is not probably acceptable to both (Taliban and the Afghan government) and especially the US will never let Iran take lead or any role in the process. China and Russia are also competitors to the US, so they taking lead is also doubtful. KSA and Qatar are the two left overs who may be acceptable to all parties. The bottom line is that Ghani is in hard waters in context to outcome of the recent peace process.

Ashraf Ghani recent win is also debatable in the context of transparency of the polls and his opponents are not happy with the outcome. Though the US is outrightly supporting Ghani yet the ground resistance will emerge from within as his political popularity is at decline. Ghani government is facing serious challenges like insecurity, peace deal with Taliban, political rivalry in context to election outcome and declining national economy. To overcome the stated issues, Ghani will have to obtain further support from the US and other donor countries in economic domains. In the realms of internal security, things are not conducive as Taliban are not softening on their demand of US exit and time frame/ roadmap. Besides ceasefire Taliban are also to be persuaded for intra-Afghan dialogue. Will Ghani be able to deliver this time, is a question, keeping in view his previous term performance?

“Overstretch Quagmire”

Pakistan is and may be one of the very uncommon countries in the world to have militarily active kinetic energy borders. At both fronts i.e. east and west, where mild to bold skirmishes takes place with the Indian army, the Afghan army and the Taliban at almost regularity. When Pakistan manages one side of the front, the other gets hot and when at both ends adversarial armies are not in engaging mood, Taliban's strike. So, overall, it's an overstretch quagmire from which Pakistan must pull out by near future or its security forces may rubber out and that may be the bigger design of the adversary.

Pakistan has an extremely fluid international border with Afghanistan, running almost 2200 KM, from where Afghan army and then the Taliban are always in a mode of radiating energy. Pakistan army and its paramilitary Frontier Corp (F.C) troops are deployed all along the border for the watch out. Almost two years ago, Islamabad decided to fence this border. Since that day till the present running time, skirmishes with Afghan army and at times with the Taliban have spiked to unprecedented levels at different hotspots from Chitral district down till Chaghi district over the zero line. These brief encounters happen either over the subject of construction of bunkers or fencing.

In the just one moth, October 2019, Afghan and Pakistan army exchanged a good ratio of heavy fire at Narai district / Kunar province – Arundu area / Chitral district axis. Plea for Afghan army to open up was that Pakistan army has constructed

few bunkers over their side of the border and that was insupportable to them. Although, at the flag meetings, it was well contended and plumped to amicably solve the matter, but the trigger-happy attitude of Afghan army spoiled the party.

By same month account, Afghan army once again argued and this time it was over the construction of fencing by Pakistan, passing by Zazi Aryub district / Paktia Province – Kurram tribal district axis. A possible exchange of fire was ably forestalled by Pakistan with an apt flag meeting and readjustments were done immediately. There are many more hotspots over the zero line which can erupt at any given time till the time fencing and construction of bunkers is not finalized, once and for all.

So, the riddle to solve here is, that if a mechanism is in place to contemplate over such matters at the flag meetings and settle them affably then why resort to exchange of fire. A well thought out mastery would be that the novice attitudes of the Afghan army is to kill the essence of such peaceful measures. The hate has morphed in the adrenaline of their rank and file so much that they resort to open fire rather than talking. While not realizing from the past experiences, that it's the talking that has always resolved disputes. Prime examples are the heavy exchanges at construction of gate by Pakistan at Torkham border crossing, exchanges over the construction of bunkers at Kurram tribal district – Zazi Maidan district / Khost province, fencing at Killi Luqman at Qilla Abdullah district axis and list goes on. At all these bloody exchanges, talks were held, and issues were settled.

The world has seen that from past two years that there is a completely new policy in place by Pakistan for Afghanistan and that is to further the hand of friendship and bridge gaps. The fulcrum of this policy included water tightening the Pakistan – Afghanistan border by fencing it. The second prime column of this policy was that all high profiles from Pakistan visit Kabul and assure the Afghans about the genuine efforts being

put in place to mend fences. However, these visits were never reciprocated, except for Ashraf Ghanni paying a visit at last when as per his consideration he saw Pakistan taking concrete measures.

At large, the fresh start sooner materialized to produce dividends and that forced Ashraf Ghanni to pay a fertile visit to Islamabad. But this bridging gap does not auger well within certain neighborhoods and power centers within the government which looks at it with soring eyes. So, they take a jab at opportune time and try at length to create a fiasco. These cunning bites have now attained cemented basis to the tune that be it border scuffles, media campaigns or discussions at the parliament and senate of Afghanistan, mocking Pakistan has become a norm.

Recently new episodes of teasing Pakistan's embassy staff at Kabul have begun. From their strolls at Kabul, to driving around, unidentified vehicles and men tormenter them to the fullest. It has spiked to such levels that Pakistan embassy reciprocated and eventually decided to shut her operations till Afghan government investigates the matter.

It's obvious from the fact that such measures are adopted, although being very few, to keep Kabul's dagger drawn with Islamabad. Under these circumstances the government of Pakistan must stay level headed by acting mature and reading these designs well and carry forward the policy of appeasement without being deterred. In case Pakistan falter's and starts to react to these measures, then what would be the difference from being a state with standing institutions to the one with a weak central auditory having ample chaos. With this in mind, foreign secretary of Pakistan and DG-ISI dashed to Kabul and sat down with Afghan high ups to resolve the issue of diplomatic harassment. This act of maturity is surely coming from a country which has indeed the upper hand at calling the shots but wants to tone down and formulate a way out peacefully.

For the future times, the way ahead for Pakistan and Afghanistan falls in the peaceful working mechanisms that have already been worked out between the two capitals.